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ABSTRACT

Although a vast proportion of the literature within the last decade has been devoted to the role of adult children in caring for aging parents, family specialists need to acknowledge how older parents continue to function as family resources to their adult children, especially when these children are coping with major life problems. A study was conducted to explore how aging parents serve as resources for their adult children when children experience dissolution of their marriages. Fifty-two parents, ranging from 54 to 87 years of age, were asked to describe their experience of their adult children's divorces and to reflect upon ways in which they were helpful to their children during this life transition. Taxonomical analyses of the qualitative data were conducted. Results suggest that virtually all of the parents aided their children in one way or another. Although advice was provided sparingly and with some trepidation, emotional support was freely given. Frequently cited modes of instrumental assistance included provision of financial support for basic needs, attorney fees, or mortgage payments; housing; and childcare. (Contains 20 references.) (Author/NB)

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PARENTS AS RESOURCES WHEN ADULT CHILDREN DIVORCE

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Abstract

Although a vast proportion of the literature within the last decade has been devoted to the role of adult children in caring for aging parents, family specialists need to acknowledge how older parents continue to function as family resources to their adult children, especially when these children are coping with major life problems. This paper specifically focuses on how aging parents serve as resources for their adult children when children experience dissolution of their marriages. Fifty-two parents, ranging from 54 to 87 years of age, were asked to describe their experience of their adult children's divorces and to reflect upon ways in which they were helpful to their children during this life transition. Taxonomical analyses of the qualitative data were conducted. Results suggest that virtually all of the parents aided their children in one way or another. Although advice was provided sparingly and with some trepidation, emotional support was freely given. Frequently cited modes of instrumental assistance included provision of financial support for basic needs, attorney fees, or mortgage payments; housing; and childcare.

Based on the quantity of literature focusing on children as caregivers to aging parents within the last decade, it appears as if a serious imbalance of intergenerational exchanges exists, with the old receiving the greatest benefit. While it is true that many adult children are invaluable resources to their frail and needy parents, many adult children are also beneficiaries of a great deal of support from aging parents, especially during times of need (Aldous, 1987; Greenberg & Becker, 1988; Hagestad, 1987; Johnson, 1988; Spanier & Hanson, 1982). The older generation appears willing to intervene on behalf of their children when help and support appear necessary (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986; Troll, 1983).

Most theories or models of family stress acknowledge the importance of resources in ameliorating the negative effects of stressful events. One type of resource, social support, is particularly helpful in protecting people from a wide variety of pathological states (Cobb, 1976; Hill, 1949, 1958; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Interpersonal networks of family, friends, fellow workers, neighbors, and voluntary associations serve as potential resources of needed support (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, p. 5). Cobb (1982) identifies four types of support offered by these human resource banks: social support/communicated caring, instrumental support/counseling, active support/mothering, and material support or goods and services. He considers social support – information that one is (a) cared for and loved, (b) valued and esteemed, and (c) part of a network of communication and mutual obligation – most important.

Caplan (1974) asserts that human support systems are comprised of three elements: "(a) the significant others help the individual mobilize his psychological resources and master his emotional burdens; (b) they share his tasks; and (c) they provide him with extra supplies of money , materials, tools, skills and cognitive guidance to improve his handling of his situation" (Caplan, 1982, p. 201). Caplan (1982) goes on to delineate nine support system functions of the family. These include the family as (a) collector and disseminator of information about the world, (b) feedback guidance system, (c) source of ideology, (d) guide and mediator in problem solving, (e) source of practical service and concrete aid, (f) haven for rest and recuperation, (g) reference and control group, (h) source and validator of identity, and (i) contributor to emotional mastery.

During difficult life transitions in the lives of their adult children, existing research indicates that many parents function as support systems to their children. Parents seem to be especially crucial in providing practical service and concrete aid. In one longitudinal assessment of the role played by grandmothers in the divorces of their children, Johnson (1988b) discovered that over two-thirds of divorcing/divorced children turned to their parents, usually for instrumental support. Of these mothers, two-thirds were in at least weekly contact with their child, 75% gave financial help, and 89% assisted with babysitting or provided some other type of service. In another study of 29 healthy, Caucasian, Midwestern, married couples, sixty percent (17) had at least one child that had experienced a divorce. Of these parents, 76% (13) reported providing instrumental and emotional support to their child. Most often this assistance included "child care, temporary housing, and loans to their daughters who had custody of young children" (Greenberg & Becker, 1988, p. 789).

Other studies indicate a number of other ways in which parents are helpful to their children when they divorce. When a purposive sample of 12 divorced men and 18 divorced women was asked about parental behaviors which were received **and** helpful to them, five general categories of support emerged: emotional support (73%), child care (39%), financial support (30%), good rational advice (27%), and respect for autonomy/regression (10%) (Lasser & Comet, 1987). A sample of 205 individuals separated 26 months or less relied on parents for financial, moral and service support (Spanier & Hanson, 1982).

This study examines the kinds of support older parents provide their children when they divorce. The paper also delineates implications of the findings and identifies areas for future inquiry.

Methods

Fifty-two parents, ranging from 54 to 87 years of age (average age = 65 years), served as informants in this study. Of the thirty-one female and twenty-one male participants, 69% were currently married, 11% were widowed, 16% were divorced or separated, and 4% were remarried. Parents had between one to eight children, with an average of three offspring. Sixty-three percent of the parents had one divorced child, 31% had two divorced children, and 6% of the parents had three divorced children. Although some children were in the midst of their divorce at the time of their parent's interview, other children had been divorced

up to 25 years. Four of the children were divorced more than once. Thirty of the divorced children were male, while 24 were female.

Parents were recruited for participation in focus groups and personal interviews through newspaper advertisements and snowballing techniques. Participants were asked to respond to a series of grand tour and open-ended questions designed to encourage them to reflect upon **their** experience of their children's marital dissolutions. Taxonomical analyses of the qualitative data were conducted. For this paper, special attention was given to the ways in which aging parents were helpful to their children during this life transition.

Results

While most parents were very responsive to the needs of their divorced children, they were cognizant of the existence of a general norm of noninterference and struggled with what was appropriate intervention. There were four basic ways in which parents resolved the question as to how much they should help. While all parents acknowledged that their grown children were now responsible for their own lives, a minority of parents thought that they had little or no responsibility for their child's well-being. One mother of two divorced sons concluded that adult children must live with the consequences of their decisions when she said, "I seemed to realize something that I didn't know 'til then, that they had to live their own lives. And that there wasn't anything that we could do." Such parents did little because they thought it was inappropriate for them to do so. Other parents expected their children to inform them of their needs, as was the case for this mother of two, middle-aged, divorced sons. "I think we've been able to sort of just let go and feel as though, you know, it's not our problem. It's their's and they'll come to us if there is anything we can do." There was a third group of parents who took a more proactive approach in being supportive to their children. "We listen and we make ourselves available. There are times when as she talks, we see the need and we just automatically take care of it" (63-year-old father of 41-year-old divorced daughter). "You recognize the need is there, and there's no way out of it. You just got to jump in" (70-year-old father). A fourth set of parents seemed to be unable or unwilling to differentiate themselves from their children and their needs. They were intimately involved with their children's lives

and would say things like, "I constantly feel that [I] just have to keep lookin' after him [Is he eating right?, etc.]. It's terrible. I just feel responsible" (65-year-old mother of 41-year-old divorcing son). Many times it was difficult for these parents to think that they were doing enough. Even though they approached advice-giving with a great deal of trepidation, several parents functioned as advisors to their children. Almost all had opportunity to determine when it was beneficial to offer advice as opposed to when it was better to keep their suggestions to themselves. In a number of instances, parents offered their children concrete advice, especially in terms of securing external resources. One 55-year-old mother discovered that sometimes this assistance was helpful and welcome, at other times it was not. "I had encouraged her to go back to counseling again, which she did for about maybe only two sessions. And she just wasn't interested in solving the relationship at all. I would have liked her to continue because I feel that for someone to go through a divorce and come away with a good strong self-image, they need counseling regardless." Most believed advice was to be given only when sought by the child. For example, one 71-year-old widowed mother of a divorced daughter concluded, "I did not want to butt into their lives... Now if they would come and ask me for advice, then that's something different. I would give it, if they asked for it." A 55-year-old mother of a divorced daughter and son described her cautiousness about being instructive to her children in the following: "They have to live with the decisions they are making and I just didn't ever want to give them the opportunity to say that I'd interfered."

Generally, advice was perceived to inhibit children from assuming responsibility for their own choices and lives. As one 73-year-old father of two divorced sons stated, "I've always been of the feeling to let the kids learn for themselves. If you keep advising them and trying to direct them, you are robbing them of the experience of making decisions, whether good or bad, and I think that is the way people learn--making decisions."

If the parent had difficulty in delineating appropriate intervention, especially in terms of offering advice, sometimes their children set them straight. This was the case for one 62-year-old father of a divorced daughter when he tried to encourage his daughter to seek counseling: "This is one of the things we had tried to push her into after her first divorce, and we got told where we belonged on that subject."

When this daughter divorced a second time and the son-in-law "wanted me to become involved and see if I could get her to change her mind or something, .. I said I'm not going to do that because she reacted very angrily to our trying to become involved."

Emotional support emerged in a variety of forms and was deemed to be perhaps the most helpful thing parents could offer their children. One father (56-years-old) of a divorced son and daughter highlighted the importance of reserving advice in favor of providing a supportive, interactive context in which children can explore their situations. He said, "We didn't challenge them or didn't question them. At 31 and 27, we feel that we didn't want to argue with them. We didn't want to alienate ourselves by second guessing their decisions...Neither one of them really wants a whole lot of your input. Both of them mostly want you as a listening person, to listen to them, not to give them, necessarily, advice..." Another mother shared her attitude about being a supportive listener in the following:

> "I just... think you have to be involved. You have to support, whatever they [do]... You have to at least give them a chance to do what they think they have to do. Look at it with them. Maybe talk about it with them... I don't think they want us to tell them what to do."

Sending messages of acceptance and unconditional love was perceived to be one of the most valuable things the parents could offer their children at times of divorce. Despite his grief regarding his 39-year-old son's failing marital relationship, a 65-year-old father shared his philosophy of the parental role in the following: "Well, we always did tell our kids that if they got in trouble the door was always open for them. We might be disappointed in what they had done, but we'd never kick them out. Always feel free to come home and we'll be there to help them no matter..." Despite their own confusion, anger, and disappointment about the situation, parents consistently attempted to send the message that "We're here... You can count on us" (70-year-old remarried father of divorced daughter). Even when parents feel powerless to remove the pain experienced by their children, they can provide stability. "I just think that if your children are going through it, the best you can do is just be supportive all through it, as best you can be to help them make their own decisions. But I think the best thing is to be there when they need

you...You can't lift them out of it, but have to be supportive through it" (67-year-old, divorced mother of divorced son). In fact, a 64-year-old mother of two divorced sons emphasized support which affirmed competence: "We just tried as a family to be as supportive as we could without saying, 'Oh, you poor child. I know you can't handle this thing.'"

The majority of this sample also provided various types of instrumental support. Financial assistance for basic needs, property taxes, automobiles, attorney fees, or mortgage payments was especially prevalent. For instance, a 55-year-old father of a 26-year-old, divorced daughter with two small children spoke of his financial contributions to his daughter in the following:

> He's cleaned out the checkbook. He's left her two kids and a house payment due next week of $1200. And here's an attorney to even answer her questions or talk to her, wants $3650. I wrote a check for $3650. I was gonna put a gazebo out here in the back of my, on the corner of my yard, and someone asked me the other day, they said, "Aren't you gonna put a gazebo up there?" And I said, "Our daughter's attorney is building his with it."

A number of parents sacrificed their own sense of financial security in order to aid their divorced children. One 64-year-old couple of a divorced son whose former wife "built up bills unbeknown to him – to the tune of over $40,000," remortgaged their house and "signed for this boy so that he could pay the bills."

Many children also sought housing from their older parents until they were back on their feet. A 77-year-old mother recounted, "And then, of course, my son could not hold on to his home and have three children to take care of, so they moved in with me." Similarly, a 56-year-old father of a divorced daughter stated, "Without a car payment, she probably could afford an apartment, but with a car payment and apartment, her job did not pay such that she could afford all of those, so she was kind of stuck with moving back in with mom and dad."

The existence of grandchildren often made the situation particularly challenging. The provision of child care was quite common, with several older parents dramatically curtailing their own daily routines and activities in order to take care of their grandchildren. For instance, a 71-year-old widowed mother of a

divorced daughter commented, "I have stepped in a lot of cases and taken her husband's place as far as being there for the children." Another 77-year-old mother of two divorced sons put her experience this way: "So there was all kind of things. They [grandchildren] needed a pair of shoes or a dress or whatever, just whatever they happened to need, that was what we had to do." This form of aid was also not without cost to the older parent, as one 70-year-old father of a divorced daughter expressed in the following:

> It [my daughter's divorce] hasn't done me any good. ... Well, I don't have the companionship of my wife. I don't have her there to take trips, and to do some of the things that I worked for and should be able to enjoy doing now. And instead, we're almost literally tied down with another family and ah..... You say, "Well, let them go on their own" or "Why can't she get a baby sitter?" She can't afford it. She don't tell us that, but I know that she can't. So we're stuck, I'm stuck. I have found out that I'm a guy that needed the companionship a lot more than I would have ever recognized years ago, and here I am. I'm in a tough situation, in this aspect of the thing.

A few parents assisted their children in acquiring external resources or services such as professional counseling or legal aid. Some even sought God's help for their child through prayer. In such cases parents helped fulfill needs for which they perceived themselves to be unable or unqualified to supply.

Discussion

This research supports the notion that older parents are important resources to adult children, especially during the divorce transition. Parents function as sources of practical service and concrete aid, validators of identity, and contributors to emotional mastery and esteem (Caplan, 1982). In most cases, parents supply their children with the provisions and guidance necessary to improve their situations.

However, older parents do face some uncertainty as they attempt to determine appropriate roles and levels of involvement in the lives of their divorced children. While flexible, differentiated parents successfully adhere to the rule of noninterference (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986; Johnson, 1983, 1985), divorce creates a new set of circumstances for which society provides few prescriptions (Kalish & Visher, 1982). Divorce frequently requires parents to take a more active role in their adult children's lives and often results in a lowering of the "shield of privacy" (Johnson, 1988b). Although parents experience a

great deal of ambivalence about how much to help, they seem to fair best when they determine their level of involvement situationally, responding to needs of their children, grandchildren, and children-in-law (Johnson, 1983). These findings, in conjunction with previous research suggest that practitioners should (a) be cognizant of the fact that parents are an important resource for divorcing children (Greenberg & Becker, 1988), frequently at a significant personal cost; (b) aid communication between the generations in order to clarify expectations and delineate capabilities; (c) support parents who are heavily involved in the divorce since they are likely to be encountering the most stress (Hamon & Thiessen, 1991); (d) recognize that geographically proximal parents are likely to be encountering a great deal of stress since those living nearby frequently provide substantial levels of support and are more intimately aware of their child's situation (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986); (e) encourage parents to be supportive and sympathetic listeners rather than advice-giving criticizers of their children (Hyatt & Kaslow, 1985); and (f) appreciate naturally existing support networks and find ways to foster and strengthen them.

These findings also evoke a number of questions for future research. They include: (a) What are the effects of parental support on child's adjustment? (b) What are the costs and rewards encountered by parents when they provide assistance to their divorcing child? (c) What are the costs and rewards to adult children as receivers of support? (d) Are parents likely to be optimally supportive only if children accept their ideology and code of behavior (Caplan, 1982)? (e) Under what conditions are parents most likely to offer assistance? (f) How do parents and children actually negotiate what assistance is appropriate, helpful, and appreciated? (g) How does history of the intergenerational relationship come into play in determining level or type of help? (h) What motivates parents to help? and (i) Given that divorce is increasingly seen as a process rather than a single life event (Pledge, 1992), what is the duration for various types of support?

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